

Stephanie E. Smallwood. *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007. Pp. 273. Paper \$23.00.

Stephanie E. Smallwood, Associate Professor at the University of Washington, analyzes the English Royal African Company's (RAC) records to explore the human story of Africans transported from West Africa to the Americas between 1675 and 1725. By examining how they were captured and brutally forced into slavery, Smallwood pieces together the circumstances of their lives before, during, and after the Middle Passage. Her analysis not only elaborates how human life was degraded and transformed into a commodity, but also depicts the experience of being suddenly powerless and forced into a lifetime of servitude.

Comprised of seven chapters, the book begins with a description of the prime months for transporting human cargo across the Atlantic. Each voyage was well-documented, and Smallwood utilizes ship logs, records from the Board of Trade, the RAC, private journals, merchant correspondences, and maps to paint a vivid picture of the captives' experiences in the evolution of the slave trade. Smallwood also uses nineteenth-century oral histories to explain how the trade evolved and how captives communicated with each other on ships and after their arrival in the West Indies.

The market for human slaves along the Gold Coast of Africa existed before the arrival of Europeans. The introductory chapters explain how the Portuguese presence intensified this practice and influenced the political, economic, and social life in the region. African traders used various strategies to kidnap, subdue, and transport their captives to rapidly expanding markets in coastal centers. As the transatlantic demand for slaves expanded, the value placed on human life diminished. Reducing people to commodities led to physical and physiological mistreatment and cruel new technologies were developed to keep them under control. Instead of focusing on data and death counts, Smallwood analyzes the social aspect of the African people, their search for community, and their endurance during the process of being bought and sold as property.

The sources offer a glimpse into the captives' experiences from their life before captivity, their exposure to starvation and disease, their subjection to harsh conditions on board crowded ships, and their sale in the Americas. Smallwood notes how ship captains gathered their human cargo from different regions, forcing captives to develop a distinct language to accommodate a variety of dialects, establishing foundations for community. The oral narratives of African American slaves in the final chapters shed light on the rise of rituals and customs of the African diaspora.

Putting the Middle Passage at the forefront of the Mid-Atlantic slave trade exposes the human experiences of the commercial system and provides an under-emphasized context to the story of slavery in North America. Smallwood provides a new perspective for analyzing this key area of cross-cultural exchange and forced migration. *Saltwater Slavery* is valuable for historians and graduate students studying the Middle Passage, African American history and identity formation, and slavery in the Americas.

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